

Baccalaureate 2012

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Baccalaureate addresses usually involve presidents offering students some wisdom about how to succeed in life following graduation. My advice today is perhaps a bit unorthodox, because it boils down to this: *Be wary of the advice you get from your elders, and find ways to gain their trust and provide advice to them.*

Generation gaps and their inherent challenges have been around since . . . well . . . forever. My own adolescence, as was the case for many parents here for graduation this weekend, witnessed perhaps the greatest public and visible ramifications of a generational divide over issues involving civil rights, women's rights, and the Vietnam War.

The world has changed so much since the 1970s that it is now vital that you educate us. The battle for civil rights and women's rights continues, along with the pursuit of greater rights for many other groups. At the same time, the boundary-less nature of today's social interactions, made possible by technological change and the powerful forces of globalization, leaves much of what past generations experienced at the same age—18-22—of little relevance to students today. The volume of information alone that is available to today's youth, and the speed at which it is attained and shared, has altered quite dramatically what is possible for one to do, where it might be done, with whom, and at speeds that were simply inconceivable just 15 years ago.

As my generation and those older have formed a worldview based on events and modes of communication and interaction of thirty, forty, and fifty years ago, today's graduates operate within a truly global environment that is changing as I speak. This global environment, on the one hand, provides a remarkable array of opportunities in far-flung locations that were barely known to my college friends, but on the other has removed many of the significant advantages American youth enjoyed for five decades following World War II—advantages that were taken for granted then, but which can no longer be assumed today. More importantly, you will see and find new advantages and openings that support what you want to do that we cannot or do not know how to see. Again, it's time for you to educate us.

Nobody likes to think of themselves as being on the "other" side of a generation gap, especially not an educator or college president. Yet the confluence of events on campus this year linked together a number of issues that I had previously viewed as discrete issues to address . . . problems that need resolution in order to provide our students with the best college education possible. These issues included: student stress; educating an intellectually risk-averse generation; the lack of a satisfying social life; student self-segregation; binge drinking; dissatisfaction with academic advising; and career anxiety in the face of what seems to be a continually faltering global economy.

As an institution we have tried earnestly to deal with each of these issues as they came up in faculty committees, student affairs discussions, trustee retreats, administrative meetings, lunches with students and faculty at 3 South Street, and at open forums with students. Yet, the outcome of and follow-up to those meetings felt like Groundhog Day: an unpleasant or at least unfulfilling repeat of the issue, over and over. Trustees, faculty, administrators, or staff, framed the discussions based on their understanding of the issues, and students provided what has become their predictable responses to their elders. The results? An affirmation of the problems at hand, but little more in terms of understanding how best to address them.

The problem in making progress on these issues, I was to discover, was akin to having elder generations advise students whose life experiences were so different from theirs. In virtually all of our conversations on these vexing issues, we, the elders, framed the problem and then failed to understand our students' responses. We needed to be educated; you needed to teach us.

Two examples of where today's students educated their elders effectively and will allow us to make progress on two fronts occurred earlier this month at the Trustees meeting. The first was a meeting with the Socially Responsible Investment Club—a group of students whose goal it is, and has been for more than three years, to support socially responsible investments on the part of the College and to increase transparency within our endowment. Five students made a presentation to three trustees, the College's vice president for finance, and me. Whatever hesitation our trustees might have felt in the past about an open dialogue about the endowment, which is not a frequent topic of open discussion on most college and university campuses, the students' command of the subject, supported with data, combined for a compelling presentation that won the respect of the trustees.

The SRI students succeeded in changing minds and setting the stage for some kind of student participation in our investment committee's future deliberations, partly because of their excellent presentation and preparation, but also because they were not simply responding to their elders' approach to and perspective on investing. They used old-world methods of research familiar to the trustees, along with an alternative path based on this generation's ideals and values, shaped by a vastly different set of circumstances than those that shaped our trustees' experiences and expectations.

The second meeting of note was a joint gathering of the trustees' educational affairs and student affairs committees. The main agenda item was a follow-up to a discussion that began at the last trustee meeting in February, which focused on a common concern on many campuses these days: student stress. Trustees and administrators have been trying to ascertain the causes of what seems to be increased stress from generations past, and to find possible ways to address the "problem." Interestingly, the students who were on hand to engage the trustees, administrators, and faculty admitted they felt stress, agreed that it was related to how much they all try to do, but rejected the suggestion that students simply cut back on the numerous commitments they are making outside the classroom.

Students noted how their lives outside the traditional classroom—volunteer work in the community, leadership opportunities within student organizations, entrepreneurial ventures, athletic pursuits, and creative and artistic endeavors—were all significant parts of their education, and they didn't believe it was worth their while to cut back. Learning by doing, is, to this generation, complementary to, and not in conflict with, one's traditional classroom education. Our students' participation in the two-year Solar Decathlon competition, and another group's experience in an intensive winter term course this past January—which involved converting a tractor engine from carbon-based to hydrogen-based fuel—required an unusual amount of time and was certainly more stressful than a traditional class, yet students are very clear that they want that kind of learning experience.

When trustees and faculty members at the meeting suggested that student stress was a direct result of their plates being too full, one student responded with a pointed response to his elders. To paraphrase, he said, "yup, we feel stress, but it is what our lives are about . . . it's the norm . . . how we live, and we deal with it." In essence, he was telling us that this stress issue is not really a *student* problem, but rather our problem. It's a problem of perspective and perception. Instead of viewing our students' busy lives as the norm . . . the world they inhabit, we view the issue through the lens of our own very different college experiences. Another example of where we can use a little more education.

The common theme one might draw from these two meetings is how the older generation benefits from being better educated by the younger ones. The great changes in the world we have witnessed over the past two decades are interpreted and experienced so very differently among the generations. The long-term vitality and dynamism of our institution—indeed any institution—requires us to understand as many dimensions of change as is possible, and that needs to begin by challenging age-old conventions and weakening a natural resistance to change.

It is important to note that resistance to change and pursuing new approaches is hardly unique to Middlebury or to liberal arts colleges. Just look at our political system and Congress . . . or elsewhere in the academy. The esteemed faculty of Yale University, in an ongoing public challenge to its president's and board's bold decision to partner with the National University of Singapore to create the first liberal arts college in Asia, has demonstrated a resistance to change that blinds an appreciation of the very values the resistant faculty are seeking to uphold.

Expressed in critiques that focus on the lack of political freedom as the reason Yale should not collaborate or use its name in establishing Asia's first liberal arts college in Singapore—a principled stance one could easily support—a good number of Yale faculty members exhibited a lack of knowledge and sophistication about the rapid changes under way in Asia in general and in Singapore in particular.

Middlebury has long recognized the powerful combination of a liberal arts education and immersing oneself in another culture. This combination is the hallmark of our approach to study abroad, and not only provides students—our future leaders—with an invaluable window onto other cultures, but it also forces one to learn more about one's own culture and oneself. A serious liberal arts college venture in Singapore would begin to provide the core educational values of a liberal arts education to the millions of Asian students who currently have extremely limited access to such an education. In addition, it would have a profound and positive effect on Asia's youth and its future leaders. The long-term effect will be a more informed and broadly educated cadre of leaders from Asia, leaders more likely to understand Western ideas and therefore to work in concert with, rather than in opposition to, Western societies. And there is much we, the "Western societies," can and would learn from those in Asia and the East.

The opponents of the liberal arts venture in Asia, who base their criticism on Singapore's local politics and the lack of political freedom, reveal an ideological commitment to a cause rather than a nuanced understanding of how multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious societies function in today's world.

It comes as no surprise to me that our most important young scholars of Western political values today, like Professor Eric Nelson of Harvard University, are forcing us to re-examine our long-held views and convictions about where those values come from and, consequently, what they mean. Nothing short of representative democracy itself, as well as the authority of governments to redistribute wealth and the concept of religious tolerance, are political values, according to Nelson, that bear re-examining. Curiously, as the world gets smaller and we encounter other cultures and peoples more intensely, it seems we are also being forced to better understand ourselves.

The details of what we learn from Professor Nelson might appear to be somewhat arcane to a general audience, but the larger point is not. The Yale faculty's view of Singaporean politics, distinct from its historical, religious, and ethnic contexts and evolution is a perspective I doubt we would see in the majority of Middlebury students today. I would like to think that the openness of our students to a global world view is philosophically consistent with Professor Nelson's work. In other words, our students are not only committed to cross-cultural analysis and learning about others, but also open to reexamining their own values rather taking them as given. Today's students, and ours in particular, have a consciousness about the world around them that is very different from previous generations, and it allows them . . . liberates them . . . to see and engage the world and themselves in broader and in more open ways.

It is no coincidence that Professor Nelson, successful in challenging the underpinnings of major ideals of governance in Western thought, was a 31-year-old tenured full professor at Harvard when his ground-breaking book, "The Hebrew Republic," was published less than two years ago. Nelson obviously possesses extraordinary talents and intellect, and has worked incredibly hard to master multiple languages and disciplines to be able to decipher, challenge, and re-orient our thinking about our most fundamental values. As one reviewer wrote in a commentary on Nelson's book, in which he highlights the way Nelson turned things upside down:

"He is not the first to suggest this, but few have been courageous enough to state the case so starkly and also had the evidence to make the claim stick."

Perhaps Eric Nelson is an excellent exemplar of how younger generations can educate older generations effectively: hard work; gain trust; and introduce new ideas.

So where does that leave you, the Class of 2012?

The great glory of your generation is that, because of how rapidly the world has changed over the past two decades, you are forced to take on much more individual responsibility for your career path, as well as for solving problems in your communities and in the world at large. The solutions and the paths to success, whatever they might be: world peace; personal wealth; fame; spiritual fulfillment; artistic, technological, or scholarly innovation; or happiness . . . however you want to define it . . . the answers about how to get there are not as clear as they once were.

The world now gives you, forces you, calls upon you to have much more room to express your opinions, educate those around you, implement your convictions, and define for yourself the best way to achieve objectives you think are worth pursuing.

The flip side of the monumentally greater agency the world now forces on you, is your vulnerability to self-righteousness: so much depends on you that you risk losing yourself *in* yourselves. I'm not sure how to advise you to steer clear of self-righteousness, but I do advise you to consider it a serious pitfall, and one you should do your very best to avoid.

Our world needs you to engage and solve and explain and educate us all, not to succumb to the temptations of turning away or turning us off. I, personally, have great confidence you will navigate your future paths with great success, as I have seen some of you educate successfully and masterfully your elders, including me. That is what is most needed today.

Good luck, members of the Class of 2012. Your College wishes you the best, confident that you will meet the challenges your generation faces, and take advantage of the distinct opportunities to make for yourselves and those around you a rewarding and fulfilling life.

Thank you.

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